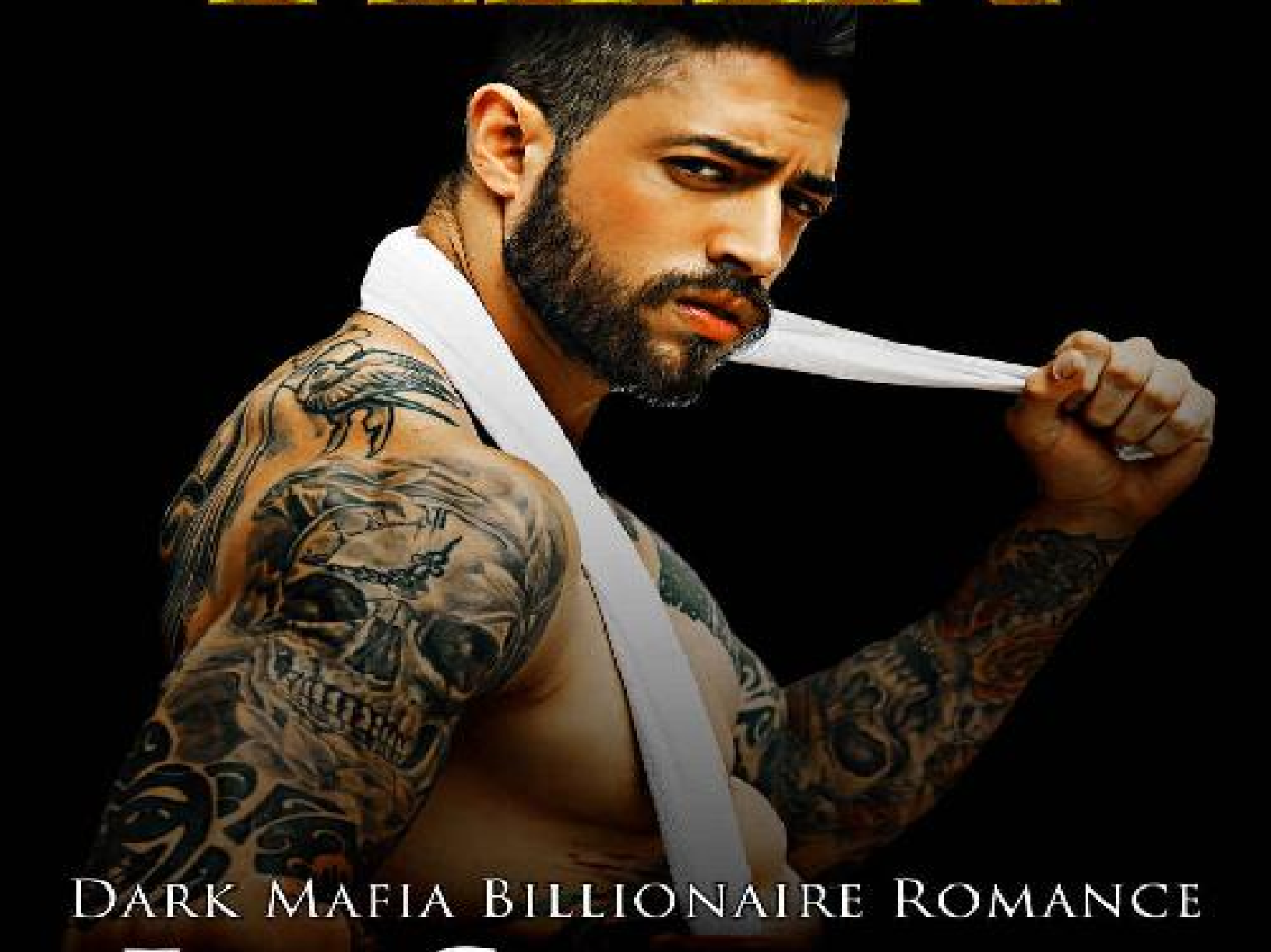
MAFIA HEIR



Dark Mafia Billionaire Romance

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MAFIA HEIR

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1

This is the prequel to Mafia King

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I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers…
-Pablo Neruda, One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII

Michael

Her lips, her scent, the taste of her fills my mouth, sinks into my blood. Her skin so soft, her curves that call out to me to touch her, her lush lips that part as I lean in closer. Her chin trembles. She tips up her face, and her green eyes peek out from under the fringe of her thick eyelashes.

"Amore mio," I whisper, *"tesoro mio."* I lower my head until my eyelashes tangle with hers, until my nose bumps her, until we share breath and our lips almost meet. *"Sei il mio cuore."*

Her lips curve.

I brush my mouth over hers once, twice, and the taste of her, like strawberries and sunshine, punches me in the gut. I cup her cheek and the feel of her soft skin against the calluses of my palms reminds me just how fragile she is. How breakable she feels against the toughness of my body. I wrap my fingers about her neck, and her gaze widens. Her dark hair flows about her shoulders, pours over my forearm as I rub my thumb into the center of her throat.

"You’re gorgeous, my Beauty." I lower my nose to the curve where her neck meets her shoulder and sniff. The scent of her, like moonflowers that open late in the day, engulfs me. My heartbeat instantly speeds up and a groan rumbles up my chest. *"Sei così bella che mi fai morire."* I kiss the hollow at the base of her neck, then work my way down her chest. She whimpers, wriggles under me, and I chuckle,

"So impatient, Beauty?" I raise my head and stare into her beautiful green eyes. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Anything you want, my lord."

"When you call me that…" A groan rumbles up my chest. "I can’t refuse you anything, you know that? You could ask me to die for you and I’d gladly do it. I’d walk through fire for you, *amore mio*, I’d throw myself off the highest mountain. I’d kill for you. I’d die a thousand deaths, if you’d only call me that again."

"My lord," the witch’s smile widens, "my master," she gazes deeply into my eyes, "the only one to whom I’d ever submit."

"The only one to whom you’ll ever acquiesce again."

"And if I don't?" She tilts her head and suppresses a grin, "What if I decide you aren’t the one for me?"

Anger burns through my veins and heat flushes my skin, "If you dare leave me for another, if you ever look at another man, if you ever let anyone else touch you… I'll kill him, Beauty. I won't stop until I've ground his face into the dirt, until I've pulled out his eyes for looking at you, broken his mouth for daring to speak to you, until I've pulled out his guts, smeared his blood on the ground and," I glare at her, "made love to you on the remains of his body."

Her breath hitches and her pupils dilate. I stare at her. She's turned on, no doubt about it. My thirst for violence seems to fulfill a need deep inside of her—one she doesn't bother to hide from me either.

"You're not disgusted by my cruelty?" I tilt my head, "My penchant for brutality seems to turn you on*, Bellezza*."

"And what if it does?" She purses her lips, "What if I say that it is the savagery at your core that attracts me? That it is the ferocity to go after what's yours that appeals to the darkness in me. That," she tips up her chin so her lips are almost on mine, "it is your forcefulness, your need for destruction, your ruthlessness in not holding back what you are thinking, your vehemence in saying what's on your mind, as you use your dominance to overpower every challenge in your path, that resonates with this yearning deep inside me to be taken, to be subdued, to be—"

"Mine," I growl as I glare into her eyes, "only mine." I close my lips over hers and her entire body shudders. A moan bleeds from her and I know then, I need her, want her, must have her, right now. I tear my mouth from hers, peer into her face, "Promise me," I order, "that you'll never hide any secrets from me, that you'll never turn your back on me, that you'll never ever leave me."

Her green eyes widen; color fades from her cheeks. "Michael, I…"

"Michael, get up, you need to see this."

I snap my eyes open, stare into the face of my brother and Second, "The hell are you doing here, Luca?"

He glances down and I follow his gaze to where I have the blade of my knife pushed up against his throat.

"Shit, Michael," he drawls, "take it easy, *fratellone.* It’s only me."

"Well, that’ll teach you to surprise me when I sleep."

"I tried calling you." He stares at my hand pointedly until I remove it. I slide the knife into its sheath and slip it under my pillow, next to my gun. I never go anywhere without both of my weapons; definitely, never sleep without them. Still, when it comes to crunch time, I prefer the knife to the gun… No wonder, I had instinctively reached for it in my sleep. It's a knife that saved me all those years ago when my father came after me. A humble kitchen knife, but it had done the job of stopping him from almost killing me.

I had turned eighteen, had come into my own as a man. It was the first time I had snatched a weapon and defended myself against him. It hadn’t been my last. It’s why I have trained myself to use a knife to defend myself. Never go anywhere without it on my body. It’s why I carry that knife —the very same knife from my mother’s kitchen—with me always. A memory of her that I keep close to me, a reminder that I hadn’t been able to save her. A regret that I will forever carry.

"Hey, Michael, you okay?" Luca scans my features, "You look like you’ve seen a ghost."

The ghost of my mother, which never leaves me… Which reminds me that I will never forgive myself for not intervening in time to save her life. Though none of that explains the dream I just had.

Who the hell was that woman in my dream? She’d felt so real. Had tasted like life itself. And her scent... That lush, elusive, mysterious scent… Heat tugs at my lower belly. *Che cazzo!* Why can’t I get those images out of my head. It had seemed so real, felt so real… I had been convinced I had been in bed with her. I shake my head to clear it and Luca’s gaze narrows.

"You okay, *fratellone*?" he mutters.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You didn't respond when I called you. Which isn't like you, at all, by the way."

I pick up my phone from the nightstand, glance at it. Sure enough, there's a missed call from him.

"When you didn't respond, I came over to wake you up. When I entered the room, it sounded like you were in the middle of a dream… Which, going by the sounds you were making, I can only conclude that it must have been about some woman—"

I glare at him, and he holds up his hands. "Hey, just tellin' it like it is."

"What-bloody-ever."

I throw off the covers, throw my legs over the side of the bed and stand up. Hell, if I don't have a hard-on right now. Not that it matters. There aren't many secrets between me and Luca. That's what happens when you are left in charge of your four younger brothers at a very young age. Our father had beaten our mother to an early grave, then he'd turned his attentions on us. I had protected my younger siblings and taken the brunt of his wrath. Luca, being closest in age to me, had had an inkling of what was happening. He had partnered with me, when possible, to care for our younger siblings.

Our Nonna had stepped in after our mother had died, and while she had done her best… It was really me who had taken on the role of caregiver for our younger siblings.

Each of them has been grateful to me ever since; a sentiment I don't hesitate to use to my advantage, by the way. And why not? I had taken the brunt of my father's temper, and yet, I hadn't been able to save my mother from him. A guilt I'll always carry with me. If I had only stepped in earlier to help. So what, if I had been very young? I had known what was happening. How our mother had silently borne his anger, his rage, his various affairs that he'd

insisted were his prerogative as Mafia Don. All of it had contributed to her heart attack at barely forty. It had left me with a healthy disrespect for marriage and a need to grow up as fast as I could, so I could take care of my family…find my place in my clan…and ultimately, have my revenge for my mother’s death.

I brush past Luca, head for the shower, "Have the others arrived, yet?"

"They’re waiting for you."

"Give me five minutes." I glance over my shoulder, "Why don’t you kick off the meeting. I’ll join you, very soon."

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2

Michael

When I walk into the conference room on the first floor of my home, I find Luca standing by the window. The sunshine streams in, bathing the entire space in a golden light. It’s November, but here near Palermo, the weather is a pleasant eighteen degrees. The same as it would be in Los Angeles, which is where I had attended university.

At eighteen, I had been the first to leave home to study. My father hadn't been in favor of it, but my Nonna had finally intervened. I wish I could say I was grateful to her for it, but the fact is, she had stood by all those years and watched as my father had systematically abused first my mother, then me.

By the time I had left home, the damage had been inflicted on my psyche. Not only had it toughened me up to survive in a new country, it had also woken up the darkness inside of me—one that had been drawn to being cruel, to exploiting other’s emotions, finding their weaknesses, plotting the downfall of those who dared cross me.

I never forget those who’ve hurt me… Never forgive those who’ve betrayed me… I always repay my debts. In full. That’s one thing my background had taught me. It’s these lessons I took with me when I went to Los Angeles… And I returned, clearer than ever on what I had to do. I would take revenge on my father for what he’d done. I’d bide my time, until I had the opportunity for retribution. Until then, I’d use the lessons he’d taught me to consolidate my influence within Cosa Nostra.

Sebastian, my half-brother, who is also my enforcer, pushes away from the wall. "Mika" he rumbles as he cracks his knuckles, "not like you to be late to your own meeting."

"Not like you to be on time, Seb," I retort. "What happened, you didn't get laid last night then?"

"Did you get pussy for the first time in months…or is it years?"

"None of your bloody business." I look him up and down, "We both know who the women prefer… And it’s not only because I am Capo."

"You’re uglier than me, that’s for sure." He smirks. "Don’t you know? The dark Mafia looks are no longer in vogue. You need to learn to look less like you stepped out of a gangster flick, and more like—"

"A successful businessman?" I take in his camel-colored suit, the blue tie that catches the flicks of ice in his eyes, his dark blonde hair combed back from his face and gelled just right. With his movie-star good looks, he resembles Brad Pitt in his heyday. And it's true that not only women, but people in general, gravitate toward him.

It’s also why he’s my enforcer. He can get the work done, not by use of fists, but by words…and his wits—a smarter way of getting people to comply, without attracting too much attention. It’s one way to function under the radar, and go about our business without constantly drawing attention to our activities. By working under the radar, my team and I aim to lull our opponents into

complacency. Which means, on the occasions when I do use violence, it’s even more impactful.

"You said it," Seb bares his teeth. "Don’t everyone rush to emulate me." He smirks as he glances around the room. Massimo, my brother who is next in line after Luca, is dressed in a dark suit and tie. So are Christian and Alessandro, my youngest brothers.

Luca walks over to drop into the chair nearest the door, where Antonio, my bodyguard…and the only member of my inner circle who isn’t family, stands to attention.

"Are we doing this, Mika?" He tips back his chair so it’s poised on its hind legs, "I need to leave in the next hour or I'll be late for a business meeting."

"Is that an euphemism for a hot date?" Christian drawls. "Or wait... Let me guess," he pretends to think, "maybe you simply have a date with your hand?"

Luca barks out a laugh, "There you go, talking like a teenager, which, oh, wait..." He snaps his fingers. "Makes sense, since you were one, not too long ago."

"We are grown men in our thirties," Christian retorts, "though Xander here looks much younger than his years, I’ll give you that."

"And I am younger than you, how?" Xander scowls at him. "Considering we are twins…"

"And you are younger than me by two minutes."

"Which means nothing."

"Which still means that you are the youngest in this group."

"Like any of you’ll ever let me forget that." Xander drums his fingers on his chest. "Surely, that joke is old by now."

"Nope." Christian smirks, "It’s only as old as you are."

"Which means it’s as old as you," Xander shoots back, "and—"

"Enough," I say in a mild voice, "you two done with your childishness, yet?" I tilt my head. "Bad enough, Alessandro,

here, insists he call himself by his American nickname."

Xander winces, "*Bad enough,* keep reminding me of that, *fratello*."

I arch an eyebrow, and Christian mimes zipping his lips. Xander merely raises a shoulder. The good thing about being a father figure to your youngest siblings is that they respect you. The bad thing is that you treat them with enough indulgence that they get away with almost anything. Not that the two would ever take advantage of my lenience. Not that I extend that specific brand of leniency to anyone else.

"So," I turn to Luca, "any further news on the guns deal?"

"We've cracked down on the Russians who were targeting our ships, found the leader of the gang responsible for it, and have cut a deal with him."

"Good," I say at the same time that Sebastian growls. I turn to him, "Something you want to tell me, Seb?"

"When will we stop pussyfooting around with our enemies and show them that they can't take us for granted?"

"Violence is not the only way to make a point." I fold my hands over the back of the chair at the head of the table. "You should know that better than anyone else, considering you have made a career out of it."

"It's because I have made a career out of knowing when not to use my fists that I am pointing out to you that the Russians shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. You negotiating a deal with them will only embolden them to come at our shipments again."

"And if they do, they know I won't warn them again."

"So why waste time? Why not attack them and show them, once and for all, who's the boss here?"

"I am," I prowl over to stand at the head of the table, "the boss here." I lean forward on the balls of my feet, "And you'd do well not to question my authority again."

Seb raises his hands, "Take it easy, *brother*." He smirks, "No need to go all Godfather on me."

I scowl at him, "Wish you'd take things a bit more seriously."

"Wish you'd take things a lot less intensely."

"Intensity is my middle name. It's my job to see the worst in a situation."

"Whoa, do you need a woman to bring out your lighter side, or what?" He smirks.

"Speak for yourself, *brother."* I crack my neck. "Moving on," I glance toward Luca, "what's the latest on the mole? Have we found out who's been spying on us and passing information to the Seven, yet?"

The Seven are amongst the richest, most powerful men in England. They suspect that my clan had kidnapped and held them for ransom when they were very young. One of our informants had ratted out the details to the cops in exchange for being allowed to leave the country anonymously. Since then the Seven have never let up in their vendetta for revenge. So far, they have not been able to confirm who was behind the kidnapping either... That is, until someone on my team started sharing our secrets with them.

"You're not going to like it," Luca warns.

"Don't let that stop you." I raise a shoulder. "I assume that means we have a suspect?"

"One of the accountants on my team, as it turns out." Christian elaborates, "He was caught trying smuggle data from the London office."

"The systems there are virtually impenetrable." I tighten my fingers on the chair.

"Nothing is impenetrable. You should know that," Luca reminds me. "Anyway, we brought him here."

I straighten. "He's here?"

"In the usual place." Luca frowns. "I took the opportunity to work him over."

"Of course, you did."

Luca shifts in his seat. "He’s refusing to give anything up."

"Ah," I crack my neck, "clearly, you weren’t persuasive enough."

"Why don’t you have at it?" He scowls.

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3

Michael

I stare across the length of the garden at the man who’s tied to a straight backed wooden chair. He’s at the perimeter of the garden, where the lawn slopes down to meet the sea.

I have no neighbors for a mile on each side of the shorefront. Which means the people I bring in here for questioning can scream all they want. They won't be heard by anyone else. It's one of the reasons I had chosen this specific building for my residence. It's just outside of Palermo, with a view of the sea I appreciate most mornings when I have my espresso on the terrace of the house.

When the weather doesn’t permit, and if I still need to carry out questioning of the sort about to take place today, I have a soundproof room in my basement, tucked away two levels below the house.

For now, though, I prowl over to the man who is slumped in his chair. Blood drips from his temples and his nose, splattered on the front of his no-longer-white shirt, which is torn in places.

"Untie him," I order, and Antonio walks toward him. He loosens the restraints and the guy almost falls over. Antonio props him back up on the chair. The man’s eyes flicker open; he glances up at me and pales. He opens and shuts his mouth, but no voice emerges. He blinks rapidly, then wets his lips.

"Get him over there," I jerk my chin toward the rectangular coffee table with the settees on either side of it on the terrace.

I walk toward it and Antonio and Sebastian support the man between them as they bring him over. I take a seat and they lower him onto the sofa opposite me. The man sinks into the back of the settee.

"Get him some coffee and food," I order. Antonio walks away and the man glances up at me. He can’t be over thirty, but his hair is already thinning. His shirt outlines a paunch over linen pants which still retain their careful pressing.

"You’re close to your mother, aren’t you?" I murmur, and he gapes at me.

"How…how do you know?"

"Probably the only son?" I take in his pale features. "Father passed away a few years ago and now your mother cooks dinner and waits for you to come home so you can eat together. She has a circle of friends she plays card with every Saturday, has dinner with them, comes home a little tipsy and is occupied enough that it’s the only day of the week when you don’t feel guilty about leaving her alone, so you can head out and meet your girlfriend."

"C…capo," the man gulps, "please don’t hurt them."

"That’s in your hands entirely."

"I… I didn’t do it," he whispers

"My colleagues here don’t think so—" I frown, "What’s your name?"

"Tobias." He swallows, "My mother calls me Toby."

"Of course, she does." I look him up and down, "Tell me, Toby, what will it take for you to tell me who you were siphoning off the information from our books to?"

"I… I wasn't," he insists. "I am just an accountant. I was doing my job."

"Who were you doing the job for?"

"For you, Capo." He presses his hands together in his lap, "I am loyal to you, just like my father was to your father, and my father before that."

"Hmm," I stroke my chin, "so your family has served mine for generations."

He nods, "That's what I mean when I say, I wouldn't dream of betraying you."

"Not even for your girlfriend."

He pauses, "My g…girlfriend?"

"Does she have a name?"

He opens and shuts his mouth again as he stares at me. "Her…her name?"

I tilt my head and he lower his chin.

"C… Clara," he mumbles.

"What's that?"

"Clara." He juts out his chin, "Her name is Clara."

"And I assume Clara likes good food, good wine, and flowers and…expensive lingerie?"

His gaze skitters away.

"And diamonds…"

His throat moves as he swallows.

"Did you buy her a diamond ring to propose to her?"

"I did," his chin wobbles, "but it's not what it looks like, it—"

Just then, Antonio arrives with a tray on which there is a jug of water, a glass, a plate of food and a mug of coffee. He places it on the table in front of Toby who stares at it longingly. "Eat," I order. When he hesitates, I lean back in my seat. "We have plenty of time, Tobias. You may as well as eat and drink and fortify yourself before we proceed."

Toby shudders, then squares his shoulders. He reaches for the panini, crunches down on it, pausing only to take a few sips of the espresso. He inhales the food, then leans back with a sigh. I pour some of the water from the jug, push it toward him. "Drink," I command, and this time, he grabs the glass of water. His fingers are steady as he drinks from it.

"Who did you give the information to, Tobias?"

He shakes his head, lowers the glass of water. "I didn't." He jerks his chin toward Luca, "He's lying."

"Asshole," Luca growls, and I raise my hand.

"Why would he lie?" I fix my gaze on the man, "What possible reason would my brother have to frame you?"

"Because…" He licks his lips. His fingers tremble and some of the water spills onto his lap. "Because he is jealous of you, because…" Toby glances around the space, "he wants your position; he—"

"What the hell—?"

Luca moves toward Toby, but I am faster. I grab my knife from the sheath at my side and throw it. The knife whizzes past them, embeds in the grass beyond the sofa.

Toby screams, the glass drops from his fingers, and he slaps a hand to his bleeding ear. "Don't kill me, don't kill me," he warbles as he sinks from the sofa to his knees. He places his forehead on the glass table. "I swear I don't know anything about this. I am just a man trying to make an honest living—"

"Except when it's about fulfilling the expensive tastes of your wife-to-be."

"Please," he raises his head, tears flowing down his cheeks, "she has nothing to do with this."

"I know," I lean forward with my hands between my knees, "but this situation has everything to do with you so," I raise my shoulder, "confess to what you did, give up the people you are spying for, and I swear you will live."

"I don’t know anything." He snivels and snot leaks from his nostrils. "I swear, I don’t." He hunches his shoulders, glancing around the space, wildly, "Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t."

"Get up," I growl. "On your feet, Toby."

He stumbles upright, his knees knocking together so badly he can barely stay upright. "Run."

"What?"

"Run," I repeat, then draw my gun.

He pales and I point it at him. "If you manage to evade my mark," I drawl, "you can escape with your life."

The blood drains from his face. "Capo," he pleads, "you must believe me. I would never be unfaithful to you."

"And yet you came into money suddenly?" I drum my fingers on my thigh. "How do you explain that?"

"I…" He folds his fingers together. "I did move some money out of the company account and into my account," he swallows, "but I did not leak any information to your rivals."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Why should I lie to you, when it’s my life at risk?"

I stare into his pale features; his gaze holds mine. Strange, I could have sworn that he was lying to me, and yet all of the signs are that he is not.

"Enough talking." I jerk my chin, "Run, or lose the only chance you have at escaping."

"I…I…"

I pull out my gun and he turns away. He races around the settee, down the lawn. I hold the gun, take aim, let him run onto the sand, up the curve of the sea on the beach. I let him run until he visibly slows down, his figure getting smaller and smaller, until I am sure he’s beginning to think he has escaped. Then I fire.

He drops to the ground, and I fire again. No sense in leaving things half-way done.

I nod at Antonio, who springs into a steady jog, as he runs toward the fallen guy. I pocket my gun in its holster, then rise to my feet. Luca steps toward me. "He was lying, *fratellone*."

"I know." I tilt my head toward him, "If I had any doubt, you wouldn't be standing here, *fratellino*."

Luca holds my gaze for a second, then nods, "I'd never lie to you, Mika."

The hair at the back of my neck prickles. I stare at him, then nod, "You're lying to me now."

His forehead wrinkles. "What do you mean?"

"You've one chance to come clean."

He tenses, "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"You don't?"

He shakes his head, and I prowl over to him. I fix his collar, smooth it down. "Earlier, you said you have a business meeting."

"I do."

"Clearly, it's a date."

Luca scowls, then his body visibly relaxes, *"Stronzo di merda."*

I chuckle, then grab him around his shoulder, "*Testa di cazzo*." I kiss him on both cheeks in a brotherly fashion, "I'll let you go on one condition."

"What's that?"

"We're coming with you," Massimo declares.

"What?" Luca growls, "No fucking way."

"Hell, yes, way." Christian laughs. "You're not getting out of this, bro."

"Hear, hear." Sebastian, smirks. "You take all of us, or no one goes." His grin widens, "What's it gonna be?"

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4

Michael

The beats from the music vibrate through the nightclub. I stare down through the floor-to-ceiling glass window at the mass of writhing bodies. Men and women, men and men, women and women, gliding their bodies against each other, twisting, turning, contorting their bodies into shapes that fit the tempo of the throbbing cadence. A normal Wednesday night at Venom, one of the many nightclubs my clan owns across Italy

A moan bleeds through the air. I turn, watch as Massimo leans back in a settee at the far end of the room. His arm is flung over the back of the sofa, his legs wide apart. A woman leans between them, her face stuck to his crotch. He has his fingers wrapped around her nape as he moves her head up and down, up and down, using her mouth to pleasure himself.

Opposite him, Christian is seated in a leather armchair, a woman draped over his lap, on her front. He palms her butt, then slaps it and she groans. He squeezes her ass cheek and she throws her head back and moans

theatrically. Clearly, she is enjoying herself too much for it to be real. Not that Christian cares, what with the two other girls standing on either side of him, both bare-chested. One of them leans down, cups her breast and pushes her nipple into his mouth. He sucks on it, while the third woman wraps her arm about his shoulder. She nibbles on his ear, pushes her bare breasts into his arm.

I glance away to where Xander makes out with a woman wearing a thin sliver of underwear that barely covers her crotch, a man dressed similarly on the other side of him. Xander wraps his fingers around the man's dick, and the two kiss passionately. The woman leans in to join them. Xander releases the man, only to grip the nape of her neck. He hauls her closer, and soon the three are straining to exchange fluids of the oral kind.

I glance at the door to the private gallery where we are. The VIP room is always booked for me and my crew. Antonio stands to attention by the door, his gaze alert, as always. I cross the room, winding my way between the various bodies until I reach him. "Where's Luca?" I ask. "Haven't seen him since we arrived."

Antonio jerks his chin toward the side of the room that looks down on the private rooms.

"He's decided to pull out all the stops today, huh?" Of all of us, Luca's tastes run the most toward being an exhibitionist. But I've never known him to indulge in it in front of his own family before today.

"He was not happy with the stunt that *stronzo* pulled," Antonio agrees.

"Make sure his mother is taken care of for the rest of her life."

I turn to leave when Antonio calls out, "Boss…"

I stop, turn to glance at him, "You have a question, Tony?"

"Yeah." He hesitates, shuffles his feet, then blows out a breath, "Why do you think that rat tried to place the blame

on Luca?"

I tilt my head, " I have no fucking clue." I raise a shoulder, "It's also not something I am going to worry about for a minute longer."

He nods.

"And neither should you."

"Right, Boss." He straightens. "I'll be right outside if you need me." He pushes the door open and walks out.

I pivot, head toward the glass wall on the far side of the viewing gallery. With its vantage point, there isn't anything going on in the club that I could miss from here.

I pause when I reach the wall, glance down at the small room it overlooks on the floor below.

I glance down and see Luca, clad in tight leather pants, raise a whip and bring it down on the exposed back of a woman who has been strung up from the ceiling. He's tied her wrists together and hauled them over her head, while her ankles are kept apart by a spreader bar.

He swipes the whip across her bare buttocks, and even from this distance, I can make out the lash mark blooming red. Without waiting, he brings his arm down and lashes her a second, third, fourth time, alternating between the butt cheeks. With each hit her entire body swings forward, balanced as she is on the toes of her feet. The pale cream of her backside is marked with red marks. He pauses, leans forward and presses his palm to her, no doubt, aching ass. He massages it, leans in, then whispers in her ear. When she nods, he pats her head and a ripple runs down her body. He slides back, puts distance between them, then takes position. Brings his hand down and whips her ten times in quick succession. By the end of it, the woman is shaking, barely able to stay upright.

He throws his whip aside, shoves his pants down, then closes the distance between them. He wraps his arm around her, his touch both tender and dominant at once. He

pulls her hips to him, adjusts himself at her entrance, and in one quick thrust, impales her.

The blood rushes to my groin…which is to be expected. The entire scene is erotic, hedonistic and set up to draw exactly that response from the spectator. What surprises me, though, is the raw passion between him and his sub. I'd always known Luca was in the lifestyle, but hadn't realized just how much he got off on the exhibitionism of it all.

There is more to my younger brother than meets the eye.

In the time that it took for him and my younger siblings to join me in LA, he had already changed. I'd realized, then, I never should have left them alone to face my father's wrath and his heavy hand.

I had escaped the first chance I'd gotten. I had convinced myself that I had to get out first, before I could send for the rest of them. Had I been too selfish? Had those few months that I had spent apart from my brother resulted in my father irrevocably hurting him. It's something we never speak about. Every time I try to bring it up, Luca merely changes the subject. And after a while, I had stopped asking about it too. Maybe I should confront him about it soon?

Below me, Luca begins to fuck the woman in earnest. She throws her head back as he reaches around to squeeze her nipple. He slides his, hand down to her clit and begins to play with it. I can't hear them, but there's no doubt that it sends her into an erotic high as she writhes and moves, tries to turn her head in his direction to kiss him. He leans back, and she chases his mouth. He grins, his teeth white against the tan of his skin. The woman pouts and he slaps her pussy. She shudders and it's clear she's close to orgasm and—I turn away from the view. Shit, now I am horny as fuck.

I turn, just as the door opens. A woman walks in. Dark hair that flows to her waist, hourglass figure, she's clad in a

green dress that falls to her knees.

She turns and heads toward me.

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5

Michael

The woman glides toward me on heels that have to be at least six inches high. The jeweled straps around her ankles contrast with the simplicity of the rest of the get up. She pauses in front of me, her head only reaching somewhere in the vicinity of my chest.

"Capo," she lowers her chin in a gesture of acceptance, "I was told you'd need my services."

"Is that right?"

"Yes," She tips up her chin, peers up from under her thick eyelashes. Her green eyes shine at me. I'm instantly transported back to my dream. The witch with the green eyes, dark hair, and skin like satin who had ensnared me. I place my fingers against her cheek and the softness tugs at me. She leans into my touch and the scent of her—something unknown, something sweet and cloying envelops me. My gut churns and my skin crawls. It's not her. Of course, it's not her. What had I expected? That because I thought of her, she would magically appear in front of me.

She looks similar to the woman who had occupied my dreams, that much I can’t refute, though.

"Who sent you?" I growl, "Who’d dare try to intuit my needs so closely?"

She jerks her chin to the side, and I turn, glance down to find Luca staring up at me. He continues to fuck the woman whose mouth is open as she, no doubt, moans every time he rams into her from behind. He smirks at me and I show him the bird. How the hell did that *figlio di puttana* guess what kind of woman I had dreamed about? Clearly, just a coincidence, or my dear brother is more perceptive than I’ve give him credit for. He laughs, then turns back to pleasuring the woman in front of him.

I glance down at the girl who’s standing with her head bowed.

"Take off your clothes," I order.

I watch as she bends, catching the hem of her dress, slowly peeling it off. She drops it to the floor and stands before me completely naked with bejeweled six-inch stripper shoes. What had I expected? Clearly, she isn’t the woman from my dreams. How had I even thought for one second that she would come anywhere close to the purity?

That innocence with that sultry, unfettered desire within her gaze. Droplets of sweat beaded across her brow, her scent of moonflowers streaked with hot sex and that potent complex taste of her arousal which lingers on my tongue… All of her, coating my senses, while my conscience is tearing at me to get away from this woman who is not her. *Porca puttana.*

What the hell is wrong with me?

There’s a woman standing naked in front of me and I am not even tempted to touch her? This has gotta stop, right here. Right now.

I grip her shoulders urge her toward the glass wall. "Turn around; put your hands on the wall," I growl. I have

to fuck her; doesn’t mean I have to watch her face while I do it.

She obeys.

"Part your legs," I order and she instantly complies. *Boring.* I stifle a yawn as I shove my hand down my pants, pull out my dick and begin to stroke myself. *Come on, come on, you can do this.* I swipe my hand up and down my length, and again…until, I finally begin to harden. Thank fuck. I blow out a breath. For a second there, I’d been sure I wouldn’t be able to get it up.

"Jut your hips backward," I command and she pushes out her bottom. I lean into her and the scent of her envelops me. Too sweet… Too…cloying. Too fucking different from the moonflowers that I want to draw into my lungs. My belly knots and the band around my chest tightens. I want to fit my dick to the channel of her willing pussy, and take her…but a cold sweat beads my palms. *Porca miseria!*

This is driving me fucking crazy.

I step back, tuck myself in. I move away and she glances over her shoulder, her gaze wide as she takes in my fully-clothed form.

"Leave," I bark as I run my fingers through my hair. "Get the fuck out of here."

She blinks rapidly, then turns, grabs her dress off the floor. She holds it in front of her as she walks to the exit.

Antonio glances over at me, his forehead furrowed. I glance away, head to the bar at the far end. I pour myself a glass of Mcallan 24 year old. Only the best for the Capo, of course. Sometimes my fucking title is something of a joke.

Why the hell had I returned from LA? Why had I taken my place in Cosa Nostra? Especially since its power is waning. Challenged as we are by the power of *The Kane Firm*, a rival faction, which is growing in influence every day.

It’s why my father had called me back, to join the fold, and help combat their growing influence. And I… I had returned from LA—I touch the scar on my throat—despite what he had done to me… Or maybe, it was because of what he’d done to me, I had come right back… To prove a point. To show him that I am more powerful than him.

That I could do what he couldn’t—unite the five families and lead them against our enemies. Consolidate my position and overthrow him to become the new Don.

And I have made progress since my return. I am close to finalizing a deal with the rest of the five families. My brothers had each completed their education and joined in the *affari di famiglia,* as well. That had strengthened my position considerably. All I need is one last, powerful push… One last strike that will show the rest of Cosa Nostra that I am ready. I need… One last power play…

And I need her. That’s assuming she is even real… She can’t be, though. She’s a figment of my overwrought imagination. Perhaps the stress of trying to stay one-up on my father is getting to me. I need an escape valve, for sure, and if it isn’t going to be sex then… It will have to be some other form of physical exercise.

I brush the knife in its sheath at my side, then head for the door.

Antonio straightens to attention. "Boss," he mutters, "you’re leaving already?"

"I’m in the mood for some training."

"Training?" He scowls, "You mean fighting?"

"Semantics," I drawl. "It’s training to stay alive, after all."

"It’s dangerous, Boss." He rubs his chin. "Maybe I should come with you?"

"I can take care of myself." I stab my thumb over my shoulder, "These *stronzos* will need your help in getting home in one piece."

He hesitates, "It’s not safe for you to be out on your own."

I draw myself up to my full height, "You saying I can’t defend myself?"

"No, Boss," he holds up his hands, "all I am saying is that, in case you need back up—"

"I won’t." I pat his shoulder. "You stay with them; I’ll see you at home."

I open the door and stalk out. Down the corridor, taking the steps two at a time, past the crowded dance floor and out the back door. I walk up the alley, turn onto the main road, deserted at this time of the night. I head toward the gym where I normally work out, and practice my MMA techniques, using my knife with my sparring partner. The cool air clears my head and I draw in lungfuls of it. I keep a steady pace, as I walk the few blocks to the gym.

I turn down a road, when the hair on back of my neck rises. I hear footsteps behind me, pause, glance back, but don’t see anyone. I slow down my footsteps, straining to catch any noise. An owl hoots somewhere, then a motorbike backfires a few streets away. The alarm of a police vehicle blares, then fades away. Silence descends, and I stroll forward. All of my senses go on high alert as I approach a junction.

When the first man springs forward from the intersecting road, I don’t hesitate. He doesn't appear to be armed, but I’m not taking any chances. I pull my knife from its sheath and thrust forward. The blade pierces his stomach. I twist the blade and he screams. I pull it out and blood spurts from the wound as he bends over. I bring my elbow down on his neck and he collapses.

A second man lunges for me… No weapons either. Huh? I duck, stick out my leg. He trips, crashes to the ground. I kick him in the side, but he rolls over, jumps to his feet. I swipe my knife forward; he steps aside, grabs my arm and twists. Motherfucker! Pain slices up my arm, my grip

loosens and the knife slides from my fingers and clatters to the ground. He swerves around, no doubt with the intention of throwing me over his shoulder. I grab his neck with my free hand and squeeze. For a few seconds, we are locked in position; then I bring up my knee to bury it in his side. He huffs; his grasp loosens. I pull free, swipe his legs out from under him. He hits the ground, and lays there stunned.

A third guy rushes me. He smashes his fist in my face. *Figlio di puttana!* The pain slices through my head and my vision flickers. I stagger back and he sinks his fist in my stomach. I grunt, then duck and head butt him. While he struggles to catch his breath, I grab him around the waist and throw him over my head.

I grab the knife from the ground and straighten, chest heaving, a headache screaming behind my eyes.

Just then, someone wraps his arm around my neck and yanks me back. *Che cazzo*! I try to break free, but he wraps his other arm around my neck, locking me in a chokehold. Motherfucker! His grip tightens around my neck, and specks of black dot my vision. The knife slips from my grip. What the fuck! Anger slices through me and my pulse rate ratchets up. Adrenaline laces my blood. I grab his arm, try to twist it off me, but it’s like a steel band. I bend my arm, pull it up, then bury my elbow in his middle. The breath whooshes out of him and his grip loosens. Instantly, I grab his arm from behind me, bring it over my head, then drop my weight and yank him up and over my shoulder.

Even before he hits the ground, I have snatched up my knife. I race toward him, and before he can try to sit up, I raise my leg and stomp on his stomach. A groan rips out of him. I grab his hair, raise his head, and slit his throat. Blood gushes out. He opens his mouth, stares up at me as the light goes out of his eyes. My stomach heaves; bile rushes up my throat and I quickly stand and turn away, gulping lungfuls of fresh air.

Fucking hell. Since when does the act of taking a life make me physically sick? Was it after the thirtieth? The fortieth person I killed? When had I lost count of the number of lives I've taken?

Feigning nonchalance, I bend over the body of my latest kill and wipe the crimson blade on his shirt. By the time I straighten, I have control of my emotions.

The sound of running footsteps reaches me. I slide my knife into its sheath, turn as Luca reaches me.

"The fuck, Mika?" He comes to a stop and takes in the fallen bodies. "What the hell happened here?"

"What do you think?" I murmur as more footsteps sound. Sebastian arrives, followed by Massimo. Antonio brings up the rear.

"Who the fuck would dare attack the Capo?" Massimo wonders aloud, as Antonio bunches his fists at his sides.

I pull out my handkerchief, wipe the blood off of my face with it. My skull feels like it's on fire, but I ignore it. Show any signs of weakness, even before your own family, and they'll begin to undermine you. I haven't come this far, only to be seen as weak. No way, will I allow this attack to slow me down. Whoever is behind it had better pray for his life, for when I find him... I am going to carve out his heart and fucking eat it.

One of the fallen guys groans and Luca walks over to him. He grabs my attacker by his collar and hauls him to his feet. "Who the fuck sent you?"

The man blinks and his legs seem to give way from under him.

Luca tightens his hold on the guy, then shakes him. "Tell me who sent you," he growls.

The man opens his mouth, but Luca buries his fist in the man's face. Blood blooms from his nose, drips down his chin.

He follows up with a hit to his side, then his stomach. The man doubles over. Luca grips his face on either side,

brings his knee up, and smashes it into the man's chin. The man shudders, then slumps back.

"Easy there," Seb cautions, "you trying to kill him?"

Luca turns to us, "Asshole tried to fuck with the Capo's life." He shakes out his fist. "He deserves to die."

"You may get that wish sooner than you realize." I jerk my chin toward the man. Foam overflows his mouth and drips down his jaw.

"Che cazzo!" Luca grabs the man's jaw, tries to yank out whatever it is he swallowed. Disgusted, he releases the guy, who collapses, then writhes around before stilling.

"Fuck," Seb swears. "He swallowed poison. How the hell did he get access to that?"

"Maybe he had it hidden in a hollow tooth?" Luca suggests.

"Who the hell would do that?" Seb frowns. "Not any of the Cosa Nostra."

"The Russians would," I murmur as I study my sodden handkerchief before tossing it on the ground, "as would the Kane Company."

"Fucking *Cawnays,*" Luca pronounces their name with an Italian accent, which means it sounds like the Italian word for dog. "They need to be taught their place."

"Whoever they are, why would they send four men to take down one guy?" Seb scowls.

"Guess they know our Capo is a master at hand-to-hand combat, eh?" Luca bares his teeth.

"Still," Seb scratches his jaw, "it seems excessive."

"Maybe they were taking no chances?" Luca raises a shoulder.

"They wanted to hurt me enough to put me out of commission for a long time," I drawl. "But considering they were not armed..."

"What the hell, they weren't carrying any weapons?" Seb stares at the fallen men, "So they didn't want to kill you?"

"It would seem that way." I fold my arms over my chest. "Speaking of," I glance between them, "how did you all know to get here?"

"A passerby saw the fight. He obviously recognized you," Luca jerks his chin at me, "and called it into the cops. Luckily, the officer on duty happened to be on our payroll, so he called me. Not that you needed the help," he smirks, "but I'm glad we got here, anyway."

One of the men on the ground stirs. Another groans. Seb swoops down and drags the closest one up by his collar.

"Take them back for questioning," I grumble as a Ferrari screeches to a halt in front of me. Christian climbs out and another car draws up parallel to his. Xander slides out from behind the wheel of my Maserati. I nod my thanks as I slide behind the wheel.

"Clear up this mess, Antonio." I jerk my head toward the bodies.

"Already on it, Boss." He pulls out his phone, no doubt, to summon those in our crew who specialize in the disposal of bodies.

My face seems to have gone numb and the pounding in my head increases. Fucking hell, it hurts like a bitch.

"You okay, *fratellone*?" Seb murmurs, "Should I call for a doctor?"

"Fuck that," I growl as I grab the wheel. "Race you home," I call out to Christian, who swears aloud. I slam the door shut, then hit the accelerator, wheel the car around the gathered guys, before taking off down the road.

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6

Michael

"The guys are restrained in the basement," Seb informs me as the rest of the men sprawl around in my spacious living room.

I'd gotten home, swallowed some painkillers, then showered and changed clothes. Now, I stare outside at the darkness, hearing the muted roar of the waves in the distance before they crash on the shore.

Massimo leans forward in his seat, "They are getting bolder, Mika." He rubs the back of his neck, "You are lucky you escaped with your life."

"They didn’t want to kill me." I crack my neck, before turning to face my crew, "They were all unarmed."

"It was a warning," Christian muses as he rubs his chin, "but for what? What do they want from us?"

"What does anyone want from me?" I tilt my head.

"Money? Power?" Massimo counts off on his fingers, "All of the above?"

"They want you to back off from trying to consolidate your power?" Alessandro speculates. "What reason could

they possibly have for that?"

"Maybe they don’t want you as the next Don?" Luca grabs a bottle of whiskey from the bar and a few glasses. He prowls over to place them on the coffee table, then pours whiskey into them. He snatches a glass, offers it to me. I accept it and he holds up his own, "To your long life, *fratellone*." He clinks his glass with mine, before sauntering over to take a seat. "They hadn’t reckoned on your skills with the knife." He jerks his head in my direction, "They may have tried to scare you, but I suspect it’s they who are more worried than ever about your growing influence now."

"That would be the assumption, now, hmm?" I take a sip of the whiskey and the liquid leaves a trail of warmth in its wake. I walk over to where the men are seated. Antonio is at his post by the door, arms crossed in front of him.

"We need to double the security on all of our businesses." I take in their features, "I anticipate they… Whoever they are, will not take what happened lying down."

"Consider it done," Luca tilts his head, "We also need to increase the security on you."

"No."

"But," Seb frowns, "you saw what happened. A few minutes without your bodyguard and they got you."

"And I fought them off."

"You may not be so lucky next time."

"I don’t intend to give them another such opportunity or a next time."

"It was uncharacteristic of you to take off like that," Luca murmurs. "You are never not careful, Mika."

I rub the back of my neck. I had been preoccupied…with thoughts of her. I had been taken in with a dream of a woman I have never met, whom I may never meet, who is, clearly, just a figment of my imagination. I need to get her out of my mind. It’s because I was distracted that things had escalated to this extent.

No, I cannot allow that to happen again. I will not let myself become vulnerable, will not give my enemies another chance to get to me. Whoever she is… She'll have to remain in the realm of my imagination… And if I ever do meet her… Something which does not seem likely, at all… But *if* I do… Then, I'll have to ensure that she does not sway me from my path. I'll probably have to fuck her out of my system… It's the least she owes me for the hard-on that I seem to sport every time I think of her. That, and the fact that the thought of fucking anyone else does not seem palatable, at all. Fuck… I need to find a way to keep my mind occupied, until I get over this bizarre fixation with a mystery woman.

"It was a one-time mistake." I widen my stance. "One I intend not to make again."

"If you were careful, you would not have allowed them to get to you in the first place." My father's voice booms through the space. I glance up to find him stepping through the door.

Behind him, Antonio raises a shoulder. He glances from my father to me. I nod and he falls back. The door snicks shut as the Don prowls into the room.

The muscles of my shoulders go solid and I have to force myself to draw in a breath. Another. Why the fuck is it, even after all these years, even though I am a grown man with my own path… I still have to stop myself from stalking over and strangling the man?

"Don Sovrano," I murmur, "what brings you here?"

"Can't I come and spend a pleasant evening with my sons?" He takes in the gathered men. Luca stiffens. Massimo's jaw hardens. Christian's fingers tighten around his glass. Only Xander is unaffected. But then, none of us are as good-natured as Xander. He is, without a doubt, the most level-headed, most good-natured man I've ever come across.

All of us come from the same parents, and except for what my father had put me through, we brothers had been exposed to a similar set of circumstances; yet each of us had grown up to be different men. We have different personalities, and disparate tastes when it comes to women, or to the kinds of kinks that we prefer. And that includes Xander… Though among all of us, he, perhaps, holds the least hatred toward our father. And that's only because of the kind of man he is. He never holds a grudge, probably because he channels all of his angst into his art, living true to his heart and mind, unaffected by others and able to live life as he wants.

Now, he rises from his seat and walks over to our father. At six-feet three-inches, Xander towers over our father. Not that I'd ever call the Don frail. At seventy, he still wields his power like a cloak that he'll take with him to his grave when he dies.

"Padre," he kisses our father on both cheeks, "how wonderful of you to drop by."

"Sandro," our father grips his shoulder, "you are looking well. Being part of the Mafia suits you."

Xander tilts his head. "Now, Father," he reminds him, "you and I both know, I am here only because this allows me an outlet to paint to my heart's content."

"And what masterpieces they are." Christian rises to his feet, "If it weren't for Xander's genius, we'd never be able to use his growing fame in the art world to identify potential new targets we could kidnap and hold for ransom."

"In return for their safety, we get access to influence and to power, which we use to infiltrate governments and those in higher echelons of power. Yeah, yeah." The Don scoffs, "Save it, son, I didn't come here for a lesson in how to run my own business."

Christian's shoulders stiffen. He opens his mouth to retort, but I hold up my hand.

"Enough, Christian," I murmur, "I believe our father is here with an agenda of his own tonight."

The Don’s lips curve in a semblance of a smile. Those dark eyes hold mine in a challenge, a look with which I am all too familiar. Perhaps it’s because I am too much like him, a trait I can do nothing to rectify, but which I use to my advantage at every possible opportunity—that I can read his moves as if they were my own.

"Very good." His grin widens, "Let’s get down to business then." He glances about the room, "Out, all of you."

"Wait, what?" Sebastian protests, "If it’s about business, we need to be involved in it too."

"I came here to talk to the Capo."

"I thought you came here to meet your sons."

"And I have." He jerks his chin, "Out, boys."

Luca’s jaw hardens. He glances at my father, then turns to me. "You gonna be okay, Mika?" he asks in a low voice.

At my nod, he turns and stalks out, followed by Christian, Xander and Massimo. Sebastian seems like he is about to protest again.

"Leave, Seb," I murmur. "You heard the Don."

He frowns, then tilts his head. "Fine, but you’d better catch us up later."

"I’ll do what I think is right." I lower my chin, "Now go."

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7

Michael

After the men leave, the Don walks over to take the armchair at the head of the coffee table. I prowl over, pour some of the whiskey in a glass, and hand it to him. Then refresh my glass before I sink down onto the chaise.

I take a sip of my drink, watch as he brings the drink to his nose and sniffs it. "Twenty-four years aged?"

"Seventy-two," I retort.

He whistles, "Your tastes have matured, son."

"Yours haven’t."

He chuckles, "You always were a quick study, Michael. I knew you’d make a wonderful heir to take over my legacy some day."

"A legacy which I hope to clean of your taint as soon as I can."

"Some things," his grin broadens, "are etched into your skin. You can’t carve them out, for they are a part of you. They are burned into your soul, and whatever you try will only engrave them deeper into every cell of your body... Until they dominate your every thought, your every action

dictated by the ghosts of your past." He stares at the scar on my throat, leaving me in no doubt of what he is referring to.

I take another sip of the whiskey, then yawn. "That what you came to tell me at," I stare at the watch on my wrist, "two in the morning?"

He straightens, wipes the smile off of his face, "I heard about the attack on you earlier today."

"You are not here because you are concerned."

"No," he concedes, "you are not that easy to take down." He takes a sip of his whiskey, leans forward to place it on the table. "The attack left you exposed. It makes you seem weak, no longer unassailable. It's a red flag to every single *figlio di puttana* out there to come after you."

I tighten my fingers around my glass, then glance up at him, "If you have something to say, why don't you just say it outright?"

"You need to pull your head out of your ass and find a wild card. One that will undo the damage to your reputation and confirm to the five families and to our rivals that you are the strongest and the most powerful…and the only contender to taking over as Don… After I am gone, that is."

"Trust me, I'll have your seat within the next twelve months."

"Is that a threat?"

"A friendly warning." I allow my lips to curve, "You'd best ensure that your own position of power isn't compromised in the meanwhile."

He stares at me, then throws his head back and laughs. "I taught you well, *ragazzo mio*." He murmurs, "You make me proud."

"You didn't teach me a thing," I say through gritted teeth, "and you make me sick."

"Now, is that any way to talk to your padre."

"You ceased to be my father the day you took a hand to her."

His jaw hardens. "No one knows what's going on in a marriage except a husband and wife."

"From where I was, there's no doubt about what you were doing to her, you *pezzo di merda."*

A vein pops at his temple. He rises to his feet, "I came here to tell you that you need something out of the ordinary to salvage your reputation, and I may have just the thing to help you."

Fuck, if I hadn't thought the same thing earlier. Fuck genetics that our thinking runs along the same lines. Fuck nature for playing the cruelest trick on me…in making me so like him. Fuck the past for ensuring that I hate him more than anything or anyone I have ever set my eyes on.

I tilt my head at him. "Is that right?" I drawl.

He nods, "The traitor who ratted out our operations to the cops in England… We have tracked down his daughter. Her location will be conveyed to you shortly. Don't mess this chance up, Michelangelo."

He pivots and walks to the door and I call out, "Don Sovrano."

He pauses.

"I don't know what you hope to achieve by sharing that piece of information, but I'll never forgive you for what you did to her."

He stiffens, "Perhaps you need to look at yourself more closely, son. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Turning, he walks out.

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8

Michael

I snatch a knife from the array of blades spread out on the cloth on the table. Yeah, I keep my most prized possessions safe, only to be brought out when I need to indulge myself. Like now, with the anger coursing through my veins at that *figlio di puttana's* words.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. What the hell did he mean by that, anyway? I may look like him, I may think like him… But where it counts—in my heart, in my mind, in my soul—I am nothing like him. I can't be.

And what about the sick proclivities that hover under my skin? What about the tendency toward tipping over to the dark side that I harbor within me? What about the overindulgence in some of the more extreme forms of S&M that my brothers and I tend toward? Did we not get that from him? Did I not get that loss of control I sometimes encounter when my needs get too much for me to contain, when I need the release that only cutting up my own skin brings me? And when that isn't enough, I carve up the skin of another. Normally, one of my sexual partners—with her

consent, of course. I only take women to bed who know what they’re in for… Mostly.

Many of them don’t anticipate just how far I’ll want to take it. Most enjoy it, and want to come back for more. Some leave, running away in the middle of the night, never showing their faces to me again. Considering I’m not ready to face the sight of another woman—not someone who isn’t her—in my bed, it leaves only one way out.

I raise my arm, throw the knife. It slices through the arm of the man tied to the column on the far end of the room.

No sweating of palms, no churning guts. Guess that wave of remorse at killing the previous guy was a one-time thing. I widen my stance, narrow my gaze on the man who's arms are stretched out on either side and tethered to poles. He must have screamed. I can’t tell, considering he is blindfolded and gagged.

Not that I care. He’d been questioned earlier by Luca, then by Seb. Neither of the captives had shared any information. Which is when I had stepped in.

I had told the guys they could leave, and my younger siblings had taken me up on the offer. Luca and Seb, however, had opted to stay. Their choice. It doesn’t matter to me either way.

His friend, the other man Antonio had brought to the basement, watches with wide eyes. He’s similarly tied to a pole a few feet away. He, too, is gagged, but not blindfolded. He’d already pissed his pants when I had let loose the first knife. By the time I get to him… Well, we’ll see how long he can hold out before giving up information.

I take another knife, aim it at the man directly in front of me, then let it fly. This time it slices through his other arm. I follow it up with another knife, then another. One to each of his thighs. Then another two, this time to his feet. I reach for another, take aim, and Luca steps forward.

"Don’t you think he’s had enough, Mika?"

"Don’t you think you should keep your opinions to yourself, Luca?"

He falls silent as I take aim, let the knife fly. This one embeds in the man’s stomach. I snatch up another…aim it for his forehead.

"If you kill him, we won’t know who sent him."

"The fuck I care?"

"What did he say to you?"

I pause, "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"You know what I mean. Every time that *brutto figlio di puttana bastardo* meets you*,* you lose your shit."

I pause, take aim lower, let the knife fly. The zing of the blade through the air, followed by the thud as it hits solid flesh, sinks into my blood. The anger slowly recedes. I pick up another knife, aim, let it fly, and another, then another. By the time I am done, all but one of the knives is buried in the flesh of the man who dared to attack me.

"Take off his gag and blindfold," I order.

Seb walks over to the man, and takes off the cloth from his mouth. Blood drips from his mouth as Seb removes his blindfold. The man blinks, then groans. His eyelids flutter open. He glances up at me then winces.

"Who sent you?" I murmur. "You may as well as tell me, considering you are one step away from dying. Don’t you want to depart with a clear conscience?"

The man tries to speak, but more blood spills from his lips. His companion shudders, then mumbles under his breath.

"What’s that? I didn’t hear you."

"I…" He gulps, "I’ll tell you who sent us."

"Tell me then. What are you waiting for?"

"The Kane firm," he mutters. "They sent us."

Porca puttana! "Who’s the leader?" I growl

He hesitates, and I raise the last knife and aim it at him, "Tell me and I might spare you."

I pull back my hand and he splutters, "Frankie…" He bursts out, "Frankie, that’s the person who calls the shots."

"Frankie, who?"

"I… I've never met him. I merely follow orders."

"Are you lying?"

"No… no…" He swallows, "I swear, I took my orders by text message. I am not part of the Camorra, I’m not, I—"

I let the knife fly and it nails him right between his eyes. He slumps forward held back only by his restraints. I turn to the other man, but his eyes are shut and he’s still too.

Luca moves forward, places his finger against his throat. "He’s gone," he confirms.

Well, fuck. I crack my neck, "I was getting tired anyway." I roll my shoulders as Antonio walks in the door. That man… He always knows when his services are needed.

"I need every single knife cleaned and returned, Tony," I snap.

"You got it, Boss." He begins to take down the first man from the pillar, when a phone rings.

I glance toward Luca, who pulls out his phone and answers it.

He listens, then nods, "London, huh? You know the whereabouts of his daughter?" He listens again. I can hear the voice on the other end of the line, but can’t make out the words.

"Karma West?" he says. "That’s her name?" He nods, "Got it. Send through the details, and we’ll be there."

He turns to me and I hold up my hand, "I’ve got this."

He arches an eyebrow, "You knew we were getting this information today?"

When I don’t say anything, he blows out a breath. "That’s what the Don came for? To tell you that you need to make her pay for what her old man did?"

"Among other things."

"Right." He rubs his jaw, "Seriously, fratellone, you could share some of the burden, you know. We are here to back

you up every step of the way."

"I know that." I grimace. "Old habits, I guess. It's not that I don't want to share. It's just, I am too used to protecting you guys from *il nostro bastardo di padre.*

Luca's features soften, "We're not boys anymore; we're grown men."

"And you'll always be my younger brothers, my family, those I am sworn to protect."

Sebastian shuffles his feet, "So…this girl, we are going to get her?"

"*I* am going to get her."

"You?" He stares, "Since when does the Capo put himself in the line of fire?"

"Since it's my reputation at stake, I can't afford to fuck this up."

"You can trust us to do this job, you know?"

"You questioning my order?" I frown and he folds his arms over this chest.

"Just a suggestion, Boss," he grumbles.

"Keep your suggestions to yourself from now on, Seb."

He sets his jaw, then nods. "Of course, Boss."

"Her father betrayed us, it cost us millions, took us many years to get back on our feet." I glance between them, "It's my responsibility to ensure that she pays for what he did."

"And how do you intend to make her pay?"

"With her life, of course."

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Karma

"Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day…"

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Goddamn Byron. His words creep up on me when I am at my weakest. Not that I am a poetry addict by any measure, but words are my jam. The one consolation I have is that, when everything else in the world is wrong, I can turn to them, and they'll be there, friendly, steady, waiting with open arms.

And this particular poem had laced my blood, crawled into my gut when I'd first read it. Darkness had folded within me like an insidious snake, that raises its head when I least expect it. Like now, when I look out on the still sleeping city of London, from the grassy slope of Waterlow Park.

Somewhere out there, the Mafia is hunting me, apparently. It's why my sister Summer and her new husband Sinclair Sterling had insisted that I have my own security detail. I had agreed...only to appease them...then given my bodyguard the slip this morning. I had decided to come running here because it's not a place I'd normally go... Not so early in the morning, anyway. They won't think to looking for me here. At least, not for a while longer.

I purse my lips, close my eyes. Silence. The rustle of the wind between the leaves. The faint tinkle of the water from the nearby spring.

I could be the last person on this planet, alone, unsung, bound for the grave.

Ugh! Stop. Right there. I drag the back of my hand across my nose. Try it again, focus, get the words out, one after the other, like the steps of my sorry life.

"Morn came and went—and came, and… and…" My voice breaks. "Bloody asinine hell." I dig my fingers into the grass and grab a handful and fling it out. Again. From the top.

"Morn came and went—and came, and—"

"…brought no day."

A gravelly voice completes my sentence.

I whip my head around. His profile fills my line of sight. He's sitting on the same knoll as me yet I have to crane my neck back to see his profile. The sun is to his back, so I can't make out his features. Can't see his eyes… can only take in his dark hair combed back by a ruthless hand that brooked no measure.

My throat dries.

Thick dark hair shot through with grey at the temples. He wears his age like a badge. I don’t know why but I know his years have not been easy. That he’s seen more, indulged in more, reveled in the consequences of his actions, however extreme they might have been. He’s not a normal everyday person this man. Not a nine-to-fiver, not someone who lives an average life, definitely not a man who returns home to his wife and home at the end of the day. He is… different, unique, evil… monstrous. Yes, he is a beast, one who sports the face of a man but who harbors the kind of darkness inside that speaks to me. I gulp.

His face boasts a hooked nose, a thin upper lip, a fleshy lower lip. One that hints at hidden desires, Heat. Lust. Sensuous scrape of that whiskered jaw over my innermost places. Across my inner thigh, reaching toward that core of me that throbbed, clenched, melted to feel the stab of his tongue, the thrust of his hardness as he impaled me, took me, made me his. Goosebumps pop on my skin.

I drag my gaze away from his mouth down to the scar that slashes across his throat. A cold sensation coils in my chest. What or who had hurt him in such a cruel fashion?

"Of this their desolation; and all hearts

Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light…"

He continues in that rasping guttural tone. Was it the wound that had resulted in the scar which made his voice so… gravelly… so deep… so… so, hot?

Sweat beads my palm, the hairs on my nape rise. "Who are you?"

He stares ahead, his lips move,

"Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour

They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks

Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black."

I swallow, squeeze my thighs together. Moisture gathers in my core, how can I be wet by the mere cadence of this stranger’s voice?

I spring up to my feet.

"Sit down." He commands.

His voice is unhurried, lazy even, his spine erect. The cut of his black jacket stretches across the width of his massive shoulders. His hair… I was mistaken; there are threads of dark gold woven between the darkness that pours down to brush the nape of his neck. A strand of hair falls over his brow. As I watch he raises his hand and brushes it away. Somehow the gesture lends an air of vulnerability to him, something so at odds with the rest of his persona that surely I am mistaken? My scalp itches. I take in a breath and my lungs burn. This man, he’s soaked up all the oxygen in this open space, as if he owned it, the master of all he surveyed. The master of me. My death. My life. A shiver ladders along my spine. Get away, get away now while you still can.

I angle my body, ready to spring away from him.

"I won’t ask again."

Ask. Command. Force me to do as he wants. He’ll have me on my back, bent over, on the side, over him, under him, he’ll surround me, overwhelm me, pin me down with the force of his personality. His charisma, his larger than life

essence that will crush everything else out of me and I… I'll love it.

"No."

"Yes."

A fact. A statement of intent, spoken aloud. So true. So real. Too real. Too much. Too fast. All my nightmares… my dreams come to life. Everything I've wanted is here in front of me. I'll die a thousand deaths before he'll be done with me… and then, will I be reborn? For him. For me. For myself. I live first and foremost to be the woman I was… am meant to be.

"You want to run?"

No.

No.

I nod my head.

He turns his, and all the breath leaves my lungs. Blue eyes, cerulean, dark like the morning skies, deep like the nighttime, hidden corners, secrets that I don't dare uncover. He'll destroy me, have my heart, and break it so casually.

My throat burns. A boiling sensation squeezes my chest.

"Go then, my beauty, fly. You have until I count to five. If I catch you, you are mine."

"If you don't?"

"Then I'll come after you, stalk your every living moment, possess your nightmares, and steal you away in the dead of midnight, and then…"

I draw in a shuddering breath, liquid heat drips from between my legs. "Then?" I whisper.

"Then, I'll ensure you'll never belong to anyone else, you'll never see the light of day again, for your every breath, your every waking second, your thoughts, your actions… and all your words, every single last one, will belong to me." He peels back his lips, and his teeth glint in the first rays of the morning light. "Only me." He straightens to his feet, and rises, and rises.

This man… he was massive. A monster who always gets his way. My guts churn. My toes curl. Something primeval inside me insists I hold my own. I cannot give in to him. Cannot let him win whatever this is. I need to stake my ground in some form. Say something. Anything. Show him you’re not afraid of this.

"Why?" I tilt my head back, all the way back. "Why are you doing this?"

He tilts his head, his ears almost canine in the way they are silhouetted against his profile.

"Is it because you can? Is it a…a," I blink, "a debt of some kind?"

He stills.

"My father, this is about how he gave up on the Mafia right? You’re one of them?"

"Lucky guess." His lips twist, "It is about your father, and how he promised you to me, he renegaded on his promise and now I am here to collect."

"No." I swallow… no, no, no.

"Yes." His jaw hardens.

All expression is wiped clean of his face, and I know then that he speaks the truth. It’s always about the past. My sorry shambles of a past… why does it always catch up with me? You can run, but you can never hide.

"Tick Tock, Beauty." He angles his body and his shoulders shut out the sight of the sun, the dawn skies, the horizon, the city in the distance, the rustle of the grass, the trees, the rustle of the leaves all of it fades, and leaves me and him. Us. Run.

"Five." He jerks his chin. Straightens the cuffs of his sleeves.

My knees wobble.

"Four."

My pulse rate spikes. I should go. Leave. But my feet are wedded to this earth. This piece of land where we first met. What am I but a speck in the larger scheme of things? To

be hurt. To be forgotten. To be taken without an ounce of retribution. To be punished... by him.

"Three." He thrusts out his chest, widens his stance, every muscle in his body relaxed. "Two."

I swallow. The pulse beats at my temples. My blood thrums.

"One."

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